

# Supporting Early Cognitive Development

Babies are driven to figure out how the world works. You can support your child's learning by providing lots of opportunities to explore, by encouraging her curiosity, and by building her confidence.

### Here's what you can do:

#### **Birth to 12 months**

In this first year, babies are learning very important early math and logic concepts. They learn about *cause and effect* when they push a button to make the toy car move. They learn about *size* and *shape* and how to solve problems when they figure out that one ball fits into the bucket but another one doesn't. They learn about *gravity* when they drop a spoon from the high chair and watch to see where it lands.

**Encourage your child to explore objects and toys in different ways.** Touching, banging, shaking, and rolling help children learn about how things work. Talk with your child about what he is doing. "You got the truck to move by pulling the string!"

**Make everyday activities "teachable moments."** For example, bath time can be a fun time for learning. Filling and dumping out cups help children learn about *empty* and *full*, and *in* and *out*.

#### **12–24 months**

Toddlers are like little scientists. They are eager to figure out how everything works. For example, they might throw a ball to the ground and see that it bounces, then throw a doll to see what it will do. Toddlers also imitate the things they see you do.

**Follow your child's lead.** Toddlers can learn almost any concept through their everyday activities. If your child loves to be active, she will learn about *fast* and *slow*, *up* and *down*, and *over* and *under* as she plays on the playground. If she prefers to explore with her hands, she will learn the same concepts and skills as she builds with blocks.

**One more time!** Toddlers like to repeat actions over and over again. This strengthens the connections in the brain that help children master new skills. Whether it's building a block tower or singing a song, doing it many times helps your child learn.

#### **24–36 months**

The ability to pretend marks a big leap in the development of thinking skills. When children pretend, it means that they understand symbols—that a block can become a car, a shoebox can become a home for stuffed animals, and, eventually, that a word stands for an object or an idea.

**Encourage your child's growing imagination.** It's important to allow your child to take the lead in your playtime. Let him be the "director." This helps him develop his own ideas. It also strengthens his thinking skills as he makes logical connections in his stories: "The dog has to go back in the house because it's raining." Offer him props to help him act out the stories he's creating.

**Incorporate math games into your everyday routines.** Count as you climb the stairs. Ask if there are enough crackers for everyone. Help your child put the socks in one pile and the shirts in another as you do laundry.

### **3–5 years**

During this time, children are able to use reason and logic to solve lots of problems, like how to make a puzzle of several pieces fit together. Their imaginations are growing, and their pretend play becomes more complex. The stories they create have a beginning, middle, and end.

**Build critical thinking skills.** Ask questions about what you are seeing and experiencing together: "Where do you think the butterfly is flying to?" Wonder about things together: "I wonder how many legs are on that spider." "I wonder where else that puzzle piece might fit." "I wonder where the rain goes when it lands on the ground." This helps build strong thinking skills.

**Build your child's creative thinking skills.** The ability to use information in new ways to solve problems is a very important skill that helps children succeed in all aspects of life. For example, if your child puts his leg in the wrong opening while getting dressed, ask him what the problem might be and guide him to figure out which the correct hole is. You might hold up the pants so he can see the different openings and identify the correct one.